

Examining Terrorism through a Constructivist Framework: Case Study of the Islamic State

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Abstract : The Study of terrorism lends itself to the constructivist framework as constructivism focuses on the importance of ideas and norms in shaping interests and identities. Constructivism is pertinent to understand the phenomenon of a terrorist organization like the Islamic State (IS), which opportunistically utilizes radical ideas and norms to shape its 'politics of identity'. This 'identity', which is at the helm of preferences and interests of actors, in turn, shapes actions. The paper argues that an effective counter-terrorism policy must recognize the importance of ideas in order to counter the threat arising from acts of radicalism and terrorism. Traditional theories of international relations, with an emphasis on state-centric security problematic, exhibit several limitations and problems in interpreting the phenomena of terrorism. With the changing global order, these theories have failed to adapt to the changing dimensions of terrorism, especially 'newer' actors like the Islamic State (IS). The paper observes that IS distinguishes itself from other terrorist organizations in the way that it recruits and spreads its propaganda. Not only are its methods different, but also its tools (like social media) are new. Traditionally, too, force alone has rarely been sufficient to counter terrorism, but it seems especially impossible to completely root out an organization like IS. Time is ripe to change the discourse around terrorism and counter-terrorism strategies. The counter-terrorism measures adopted by states, which primarily focus on mitigating threats to the national security of the state, are preoccupied with statist objectives of the continuance of state institutions and maintenance of order. This limitation prevents these theories from addressing the questions of justice and the 'human' aspects of ideas and identity. These counter-terrorism strategies adopt a problem-solving approach that attempts to treat the symptoms without diagnosing the disease. Hence, these restrictive strategies fail to look beyond calculated retaliation against violent actions in order to address the underlying causes of discontent pertaining to 'why' actors turn violent in the first place. What traditional theories also overlook is that overt acts of violence may have several causal factors behind them, some of which are rooted in the structural state system. Exploring these root causes through the constructivist framework helps to decipher the process of 'construction of terror' and to move beyond the 'what' in theorization in order to describe 'why', 'how' and 'when' terrorism occurs. Study of terrorism would much benefit from a constructivist analysis in order to explore non-military options while countering the ideology propagated by the IS.

Keywords : constructivism, counter terrorism, Islamic State, politics of identity

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